

Hall of Fame Inductees

Engineering Heritage Queensland

Sir John Robert KEMP

MIEAust

1883 - 1955

INDUCTED IN 2003

John Kemp, engineer and public servant, attended state schools and studied engineering at the University of Melbourne from 1905-06. He worked (1905-07) as a draftsman and cadet engineer in the Victorian Department of Public Works before becoming assistant-examiner in the patents branch of the Commonwealth Department of Trade and Customs. An appointment (1910) as shire engineer of Karkaroc Shire, in north-west Victoria, gave him a grounding in local government administration. Three years later he joined the Victorian Country Roads Board. The CRB was at the forefront of Australian road-making and Kemp's experience earned him the post of foundation chairman (1920) of the Queensland Main Roads Board. In 1925 the board was replaced by the Main Roads Commission, with Kemp as sole commissioner. He initiated a State-wide road-survey and liaised with local government authorities on long-term planning for the construction and maintenance of declared 'main' roads.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, when horses provided most of the work power, he was a familiar sight to road-gangs during his tours of inspection, often conducted in the knee-deep mud of Central Queensland's black-soil plains.

He encouraged his staff to study for formal qualifications at the Central Technical College and, after 1930, at the University of Queensland where he assisted in developing the curriculum for the faculty of engineering. That year he became a board-member of the Professional Engineers of Queensland. He was vice-chairman (1925) and chairman (1927) of the Queensland Division of the Institution of Engineers, Australia and a councillor (1923-34), vice-president (1928-30) and president (1931-32) of the national body. In 1938 he was the Australian delegate to the international road congress in The Hague, and

made an extensive tour of Europe and the United States of America to observe new road technology.

He chaired (1935-36) the royal commission on the electricity supply system and was a member (1936-37) of the royal commission on transport. Chairman (1932-38) of the industry, mining and works committee of the State Employment Council (which assessed development projects for unemployment relief), he headed the Stanley River Works Board, formed to build Somerset Dam, and the Bridge Board, on which his drive and enthusiasm contributed to the early completion (1940) of Brisbane's Story Bridge. From 1939 he held office as Queensland's co-ordinator-general of works.

In 1942, Kemp became deputy director-general of allied works, Queensland, and supervised hundreds of defence projects, ranging from airstrips to naval bases. To meet military deadlines, he overcame shortages of manpower and equipment, and the logistical problems of moving plant and workers throughout Queensland. Begun in August 1942, the Brisbane Graving Dock was completed in twenty-two months, despite wartime shortages.

Kemp was awarded the W. C. Kernot medal (1932) by the University of Melbourne and the (Sir) Peter Nicol Russell medal (1942) by the Institution of Engineers. As chairman (1937-46) of the Works Board, he was involved in building the University of Queensland at St Lucia. A member (1927-55) of the university's senate, he received the honorary degree of master of engineering in 1949, the year he retired as Main Roads commissioner. In 1951 he was knighted for distinguished services to Queensland's public works.